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# Undermining, defusing or defending European integration? Assessing public communication of European executives in times of EU politicisation

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**Abstract.** How do mainstream political executives cue their politicised constituencies on European integration? Moving beyond static expectations that EU politicisation induces executives to either undermine, defuse or defend integration, this article theorises executives' incentives under different configurations of public and partisan Euroscepticism in their home countries. Expectations are tested on the sentiment and complexity that executives attach to European integration in almost 9,000 public speeches delivered throughout the Euro Crisis. It is found that national leaders faced with sceptical public opinion and low levels of partisan Euroscepticism rhetorically undermine integration, whereas European Commissioners faced with similar conditions are prone to defend it. These responses intensify disproportionally with growing public Euroscepticism, but are moderated by Eurosceptic party strength in surprising ways. When such challenger parties come closer to absorbing the Eurosceptic potential in public opinion, executive communication turns more positive again but also involves less clear rhetorical signals. These findings move beyond existing uniform expectations on mainstream responses to Eurosceptic challenges and highlight the relevance of different domestic configurations of EU politicisation.

**Keywords:** politicisation; European integration; elite communication; sentiment analysis; text complexity

## Introduction

At its sixtieth anniversary, the European Union (EU) looks back on two turbulent decades. Along with a series of failed integration referendums, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and pronounced protests against various EU policies, supranational authority has become publicly visible and contested among a widening group of societal actors. Contrasting the periods in which the 'permissive consensus' allowed European executives to freehandedly shape supranational decision making, European integration has become 'politicised' (De Wilde 2011; De Wilde & Zürn 2012; Hooghe & Marks 2009). As a consequence, further political integration in Europe has become more dependent on the consent of the wider citizenry in the member states.

In this context, the public communication of European executive actors – most notably, the Heads of State and Government as well as European Commissioners – matters for the future process of European integration for two reasons. First,we know that public opinion on European integration is not only driven by citizens' material and ideational preferences, but also depends to a considerable degree on elite cueing (Gabel & Scheve 2007; Steenbergen et al. 2007).How European executives communicate European integration thus affects the way in which public debates on future integration evolve. Second, since Schelling's (1980)

'paradox of weakness', Putnam's (1988) idea of two-level games, Fearon's (1994) signaling game or Schimmelfennig's (2001) 'community trap', we know that public commitments can have a strong impact on bargaining outcomes. If executives tie their hands in public, the reputational costs of concessions in closed-door negotiations increase. Accordingly, public communication affects the bargaining space available for future integration. Thus, it is highly relevant to ask: how do European executives communicate European integration when they face EU politicisation at home?

The literature on the consequences of politicisation proposes three diverging scenarios implying very different communication strategies. Most prominently, the constraining dissensus argument holds that national leaders under pressure from Eurosceptic parties at home become more hesitant to engage in European integration as they 'worry about the electoral consequences of their European policies' (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 21). In this scenario, executives try to conciliate the Eurosceptics at home by undermining European integration in their public communication. The technocratic resilience argument, in contrast, expects that executives aim to shield European integration from 'the fallout of domestic politicization' (Schimmelfennig 2014: 334). This scenario implies that executives defuse political debates on European integration by resorting to technocratic, scientific or managerial language in their speeches, so as to avoid signaling political choice (Wood & Flinders 2014: 161–164). Finally, the re-legitimation argument posits that Eurosceptic challenges trigger active justification efforts by those holding executive power in the EU (Rauh 2018; Zürn 2014). In this scenario, European executives are expected to actively defend European integration in their public communication.

Each of these scenarios finds some support in recent political developments. In line with the constraining dissensus argument, we have seen several national leaders conciliating domestic Euroscepticism, with David Cameron's highly consequential decision to put forward a Brexit referendum as its most glaring example. Angela Merkel's press conferences after various Council summits during the Euro Crisis are most consistent with the technocratic resilience argument as they provide first-hand examples of defusing the political conflicts involved. Finally, in support of the re-legitimation argument, Emmanuel Macron's 2017 election campaign suggests that decidedly pro-European stances can still win elections even in the face of strong Eurosceptic challenger parties.

These anecdotes suggest that the three scenarios in the extant literature are hardly mutually exclusive states of the world. Rather, we need to integrate them and have to disentangle the conditions that render undermining, defusing or defending European integration strategically attractive. We thus theorise the incentives of different types of European executives under varying configurations of public and partisan Euroscepticism in their domestic setting. To scrutinise our expectations empirically, we employ a text analysis to extract the sentiment and the complexity that national leaders and European Commissioners attach to European integration in almost 9,000 speeches drawn from the *EUSpeech* dataset (Schumacher et al. 2016). Covering the period 2007–2015, these data allow us to link key elements of communicating European integration to public-opinion and party-based measures for domestic EU politicisation during the onset of the Euro Crisis.

Our results indicate that national leaders tend to undermine European integration when public opinion turns more sceptical, while European Commissioners tend to defend it. These divergent signals intensify disproportionally with more public Euroscepticism, suggesting

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nonlinear incentives and possibly self-reinforcing dynamics. Executives' communicative responses to public Euroscepticism are furthermore moderated by the strength of Eurosceptic parties, but in surprising ways: where such parties are closer to absorbing the Eurosceptic potential in public opinion, national leaders' communication on European integration turns less negative again. Thus, pro-European coalitions of supranational and national actors are possible even in the presence of strong Eurosceptic challenger parties. However, we also find that both Commissioners and national leaders send more complex messages on European integration when they face challenger parties at home, indicating a defusion strategy. Together, these findings underline that the long-term consequences of EU politicisation are not as clear-cut as the extant scenarios suggest. Rather, our discussion highlights the importance of specific configurations of public and partisan Euroscepticism.

## Theory

### *The politicisation of European integration*

For large parts of its history, European integration was characterised by a 'permissive consensus' among the wider citizenry (Lindberg & Scheingold 1970: Chapters 3 and 8). In the 1950s and 1960s, citizens in EU member states hardly saw an immediate relevance and were diffusely supportive of political integration. Against this tacit public approval, it was in the hands of political executives to pool and delegate formerly national powers in intergovernmental and supranational institutions (Lindberg & Scheingold 1970: 250).

But even early observers did not expect this permissive consensus to last forever. Lindberg and Scheingold (1970: 277–278) themselves warned that 'the level of support or its relationship to the political process would be significantly altered' if the supranational polity was 'to broaden its scope or increase its institutional capacities markedly'. Similarly, Schmitter (1969: 165–166) argued that the accumulation of supranational powers would eventually increase 'the controversiality of joint decision making' leading to 'a widening of the audience or clientele interested and active in integration'. Indeed, five European treaty expansions and four decades of supranational lawmaking later, it seems that European 'decision making has shifted from an insulated elite to mass politics' (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 13), although there is notable variation over time, countries and political arenas (De Wilde et al. 2016; Hutter et al. 2016).

This change is succinctly referred to as the 'politicisation of European integration'. De Wilde's (2011: 560) encompassing definition captures EU politicisation as an 'increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU'. Zürn et al. (2012: 71) understand politicisation as a 'growing public awareness of international institutions and increased public mobilization of competing political preferences regarding institutions' policies or procedures'. Statham and Trenz (2012: 3) use the concept to describe soaring debates and controversies on supranational issues in the public sphere that different observers explain by partisan strategies in electoral competition (Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter et al. 2016).While European integration has arguably always involved political (i.e., collectively binding) decisions, politicisation directs attention to the degree to which these decisions are also collectively debated.

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Both from public opinion and partisan competition perspectives, the 'politicization of EU issues often involves debate about the nature of the EU polity itself and raises the question of legitimacy' (De Wilde 2011: 564). However, the construction of legitimacy is a two-sided process: not only do constituencies grant legitimacy to governmental institutions, but actors holding authority also engage in active legitimation efforts (Barker 2001;Weber 1978).Legitimacy, then, is the outcome of an interactive process between rulers and subjects (Hurrelmann et al. 2007). Politicisation thus 'drives organizations to engage in strategic communication in order to manage legitimacy' (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2017).

With a view to the EU, however, it is not obvious what such self-legitimation could look like. In the complex setting of multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks 2001), various national and supranational executives, facing different constituencies with varying demands, shape the authoritative communication on European integration. While the self-legitimation perspective posits that these elites will respond to politicisation, deducing how they do so requires further theorising, to which we turn next.

*Three scenarios for the future of European integration in a politicised context*

The recent literature on European integration provides three large-scale arguments on the consequences of politicisation. The most prominent line of reasoning is the *constraining dissensus argument* developed in Hooghe and Marks' (2009) postfunctionalist theory of European integration. It posits that European integration does not fit the left-right dimension that has traditionally structured domestic political competition. Rather, it is said to unfold mobilising potential on a cultural dimension that pits citizens with exclusive national identities against those with more cosmopolitan value sets. This conflict structure makes European issues risky for mainstream executives, leading to the expectation that they avoid mobilising them at all. However, this will change if Eurosceptic parties credibly mobilise against European integration along culturally conservative ideologies. In particular, governments of countries with a high level of public Euroscepticism and with successful parties from the populist right are expected to become more critical of European integration because they 'worry about the electoral consequences of their European policies' (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 21). Empirical studies of national and European election campaigns find support of such Eurosceptic contagion, but also highlight variance across policy- and polity-contestation as well as across different setups of domestic partisan competition (e.g., Braun et al. 2016; Hutter et al. 2016; Meijers 2015; Spoon 2012).

A second line of reasoning, which we dub the *technocratic resilience argument*, does not expect public concessions to domestic Euroscepticism. In fact, it hardly expects any lasting politicisation effects on European integration at all. Perspectives in this vein build on the claim that the EU still operates 'in areas where most citizens remain "rationally ignorant"' (Moravcsik 2006). This leads to the belief that the widespread politicisation of European integration is a contained short-term phenomenon at best. If and when it occurs, their shared functional interests should incentivise political executives to engage in maintaining the technocratic basis on which the political unification of Europe has prospered so far (Bartolini 2006; Hurrelmann 2007; Majone 2000). Regarding the Euro Crisis, for example, we see that national executives engaged heavily in the formation of Euro-friendly governments, proactively avoided referendums, and tried to delegate as much competences

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as possible to the most insulated and detached supranational organisations such as the European Commission or the European Central Bank (Schimmelfennig 2014). In this vein, European integration is understood as a 'collusion' of mainstream executives who aim to shield functionally necessary decisions from the vagaries of political competition (Mair 2005; Nicolaïdis & Meunier 2002: 175). In this perspective, the rational executive response to politicisation is active de-politicisation.

A third line of reasoning, which we call the *re-legitimation argument*, comes with a much more benign view on EU politicisation, arguing that it creates opportunities for deepening integration (Rauh & Zürn 2014). Widespread public debates are expected to identify all those societal interests and demands affected by supranational policies and politics (Statham & Trenz 2015; Zürn 2006). Politicisation is thought of as a discursive process between opposition and support in which mainstream executives interested in retaining European integration have incentives to take sides. Rather than giving in to Eurosceptic parties or engaging in de-politicisation, they are expected to selectively mobilise the pro-European or undecided parts of their electorate. Indeed, recent empirical evidence suggests that pro-European parties often hold on to their position when facing Eurosceptic challenger parties (at least when their supporters are united; Adam et al. 2017), that European elites emphasise public interests more strongly in the face of politicisation (De Bruycker 2017), that they adopt a more pro-European perspective against salient Euroscepticism at home (Bes 2017) or that they even alter the contents of supranational policies in response (Rauh 2018; Van der Veer & Haverland 2018).

Admittedly, these arguments focus on the long-term consequences of EU politicisation for future European integration. They are thus hard to test conclusively in the short term. But the varying assumptions about actor behaviour driving these scenarios result in different predictions on mainstream executives' communication about European integration. The constraining dissensus scenario predicts that electoral considerations drive national leaders to *undermine* European integration in their communication efforts when facing Euroscepticism at home. We should expect clear and negative communicative signals to their electorate. The technocratic resilience scenario rather predicts that executives try to contain Euroscepticism and the politicisation it might create. Thus, the communication of national and supranational executives should strategically *defuse* European integration. We should expect very technocratic language – that is, technical, managerialist, scientific and ultimately more complex utterances that are harder to decipher for the wider electorate. This blurs political stances (Jenkins 2011; Wood & Flinders 2014: 163) and is thus geared to de-politicise European integration. The re-legitimation argument, finally, predicts that executives try to mobilise pro-European voters and to thus *defend* European integration in their public communication. We should expect clear and positive messages in the face of increasing domestic Euroscepticism. Against these varying predictions, the negativity or positivity as well as the clarity or complexity of executives' public messages on European integration provide tangible empirical implications of the different scenarios.

While the scenarios thus clarify how mainstream executives might respond to domestic EU politicisation, we do not believe that neither one nor the other captures political reality in full. Even the cursory overview here shows that each scenario limits attention to specific actors with over-simplified motivations, on the one hand, and to particular elements and configurations of domestic EU politicisation, on the other. Integrating them on a

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theoretical level, we posit, results in a more complete understanding of executives' responses to domestic EU politicisation.

*Unpacking actor incentives under varying configurations of EU politicisation*

Let us start with the different actors and their basic motivations. Most generally and in line with the sketched scenarios, we assume that executive actors respond strategically to changing political contexts. Whereas the constraining dissensus argument emphasises national leaders who are motivated by domestic electoral concerns only, the technocratic resilience and re-legitimation arguments include supranational actors as well and focus on their functional interests in maintaining European integration.

We consider both types of actors as relevant players in executive discourse. Moreover, we assume that political actors follow both policy-seeking and office-seeking motives – that is, they care about the effective solution of societal problems but they are also interested in maintaining their power and career prospects. When it comes to European integration, the few extant elite surveys show that there is a broad elite consensus on the functional necessity of political cooperation in Europe (Dehousse et al. 2009; Hooghe 2003). From a purely policy-seeking perspective, mainstream executives should, by and large, have little incentive to undermine European integration in their public communication.[1]

However, EU politicisation challenges this pro-European backdrop. More sceptical positions among domestic constituencies should make office-seeking motives relatively more salient. If the EU is sufficiently politicised, especially *national leaders* face a higher risk that taking a positive stance on European integration affects their power and career prospects in a negative way. Pleasing a sceptical electorate is important for national leaders as they depend on public support for re-election in the long run, and for the more immediate backing of their governments and parties in the short run. This is the gist of the constraining dissensus argument: growing public Euroscepticism in conjunction with office-seeking considerations creates incentives for national leaders to turn towards undermining European integration in public.

> *H1a*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, national leaders attach more negative sentiments to their public messages on European integration.

However, the re-legitimation and technocratic resilience scenarios remind us that national leaders are not the only relevant group of executive actors who communicate about European integration. We also focus on *European Commissioners* for three reasons. First, along the Commission's legislative and judicial powers they wield considerable agenda-setting power on the content and direction of European integration. Second, being appointed and delegated by domestic governments they are often considered to be important national representatives on the supranational scene (Thomson 2008). And third, analyses of domestic media coverage highlight that Commissioners and the Commission feature rather prominently in public discourse on European issues (Adam & Pfetsch 2009; Gattermann 2018; Koopmans 2007). The power and career prospects of European Commissioners also depend on the electorate, but in a less direct and more long-term way (Meyer 2009: 1054). First, the 'principal-agent' relationship between Commissioners and

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their home governments suggests that the re-appointment chances of extant Commissioners depend on future pro-European governments at home (Wonka 2007). Second, in order to be powerful on the supranational level, Commissioners need to be able to build pro-European coalitions also in the domestic setting. Third, even if they do not strive for reappointment, their supranational expertise will be a less valuable career asset if their country of origin turns away from further integration in the future. For these office-seeking motives, Commissioners will have incentives to 'convince' their domestic audience of the benefits of European integration. Since both the policy-seeking and the office-seeking motives of European Commissioners point in the same direction, defending European integration should be their dominant strategy in a politicised climate at home:

> *H1b*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, European Commissioners attach more positive sentiments to their public messages on European integration.

Beyond just undermining or defending integration, the technocratic resilience perspective suggests that European executives will combine this with communicative defusion. Along our assumptions, national leaders especially face a dilemma. They privately prefer European integration while they fear the electoral costs of defending it in public. In this setting, trying to de-politicise the issue is an attractive strategy. Using vague, technocratic language that is harder to decipher for the wider electorate helps to avoid sending strong political signals and mitigates the risk to alienate potential voters (as such, defusion is very similar to the idea of position blurring in party competition as studied by Rovny 2012). We thus expect:

> *H2a*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, national leaders attach higher complexity to their public messages on European integration.

For Commissioners, we might initially expect that technocratic actors draw a more complex picture of European integration. Yet, assuming that both their policy-seeking and office-seeking motives strongly push them towards defending European integration in public, we expect that higher public Euroscepticism at home drives them also to sending much clearer messages:

> *H2b*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, European Commissioners attach lower complexity to their public messages on European integration.

Beyond differing strategic incentives for different types of executive, we also note that each of the three extant scenarios limits its attention to specific elements and configurations of EU politicisation. The constraining dissensus argument stresses primarily that challenger parties can successfully mobilise Euroscepticism but ignores that large parts of the electorate might still favour European integration. The technocratic resilience argument, in contrast, seems to assume that electoral challenges emerging from Euroscepticism can be evaded no matter how strongly they shake up national political systems. The re-legitimation argument emphasises that a pro-European majority in the public offers opportunities for

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pro-European counter-mobilisation while it remains silent on cases where Eurosceptic positions have almost reached majority status. Especially on these issues, there is value in integrating the scenarios by deriving more specific expectations.

Specifically, we posit that the office-seeking considerations are not just linearly related to public Euroscepticism. Compare the situation where executives face, say, 10 per cent Eurosceptics in their electorate, to a situation where this has increased to 50 per cent. In the former case, a national leader who is pro-EU privately has only very weak electoral incentives to appeal to the few Eurosceptics at all. Rather she could speak to the remaining 90 per cent, as the re-legitimation perspective suggests. Or, as the technocratic resilience argument implies, she may believe that defusing European integration is a good strategy to evade the limited mobilisation potential that this small group of potential voters presents. In the latter case, in contrast, the Eurosceptics are close to being a majority. In this setting, the national leader will not get away with defusion, but rather has disproportionally strong electoral incentives to undermine European integration in public. From an office-seeking perspective, the electoral threat emerging from public Euroscepticism should grow increasingly faster as it moves closer to, or even exceeds the majority threshold. This implies that communicative responses to politicisation should also change exponentially:

> *H3a*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, the sentiment national leaders attach to their public messages on European integration turns exponentially more negative.
>
> *H3b*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, the complexity national leaders attach to their public messages on European integration declines exponentially.

For European Commissioners, the career threats should also increase exponentially with the share of the electorate that opposes European integration. But given their incentive structure theorised above, this should lead them to defend European integration even more strongly. We thus expect them to send even more positive and clearer messages when public Euroscepticism moves towards being a majority opinion at home:

> *H3c*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, the sentiment EU Commissioners attach to their public messages on European integration turns exponentially more positive.
>
> *H3d*: With increasing public Euroscepticism in their home country, the complexity EU Commissioners attach to their public messages on European integration declines exponentially.

Finally, reading the constraining dissensus and the re-legitimation perspective together implies that a high level of public Euroscepticism is of limited electoral concern in the absence of Eurosceptic parties. If a given party system features no decidedly Eurosceptic party, sceptical public opinion has no relief valve and remains electorally inconsequential in the short run. But the better Eurosceptic parties are organised, the more credible and attractive they become for Eurosceptic voters. This, in turn, should raise the salience of European issues for established parties as well (Meijers & Rauh 2016). The electoral

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threat that Eurosceptic public opinion embodies should thus increase with the successful mobilisation of Eurosceptic parties. In other words, we consider partisan Euroscepticism to be an amplifier for the position-taking and position-blurring effects emerging from Euroscepticism in domestic public opinion (see also Adam et al. 2017; Rovny 2012). Consistent with their basic incentive structures, this should affect national leaders and European Commissioners alike:

> *H4a*: The negative effect of public Euroscepticism on the sentiment national leaders attach to their public messages on European integration is moderated by the strength of Eurosceptic parties.
>
> *H4b*: The positive effect of public Euroscepticism on the complexity national leaders attach to their public messages on European integration is moderated by the strength of Eurosceptic parties.
>
> *H4c*: The positive effect of public Euroscepticism on the sentiment EU Commissioners attach to their public messages on European integration is moderated by the strength of Eurosceptic parties.
>
> *H4d*: The negative effect of public Euroscepticism on the complexity EU Commissioners attach to their public messages on European integration is moderated by the strength of Eurosceptic parties.

Taken together this theoretical model integrates the so far rather static scenarios on the effects of EU politicisation. It fills the blind spots in one scenario with the insights generated by the other two. Without sacrificing too much parsimony, this allows us to draw a more comprehensive picture of the authoritative discourse on the future of European integration. But do these expectations live up to empirical political practice?

**Research design**

We evaluate our hypotheses by resorting to the *EUSpeech* dataset, which is the largest collection of public speeches delivered by European elites to date.[2] Analysing consciously crafted speeches rather than spontaneous utterances is particularly relevant for analysing strategic communicative choices of executive actors. Spanning an investigation period from 2007 to 2015, this collection furthermore allows us to cover a key period for the politicisation of European integration during the outbreak of the public debt and subsequent Euro Crisis. While the literature disagrees on whether the politicisation levels caused by the Crisis were unprecedented (see also Börzel & Risse 2017; Grande & Kriesi 2015; Rauh & Zürn 2014; Schimmelfennig 2014), for our purposes it suffices that this particular challenge of European integration invoked both distributional and identity-based conflicts in various member states which, in turn, led to extraordinary public visibility of supranational decision making. Figure 1 further underlines that the politicisation during the Euro Crisis involved significant increases in public and partisan Euroscepticism.

The left panel of Figure 1 shows the net percentages of those attributing a very/fairly positive image to the EU over those attributing a very/fairly negative image in the biannual Eurobarometer surveys. In 2007, positive EU images outweigh negative EU images by about

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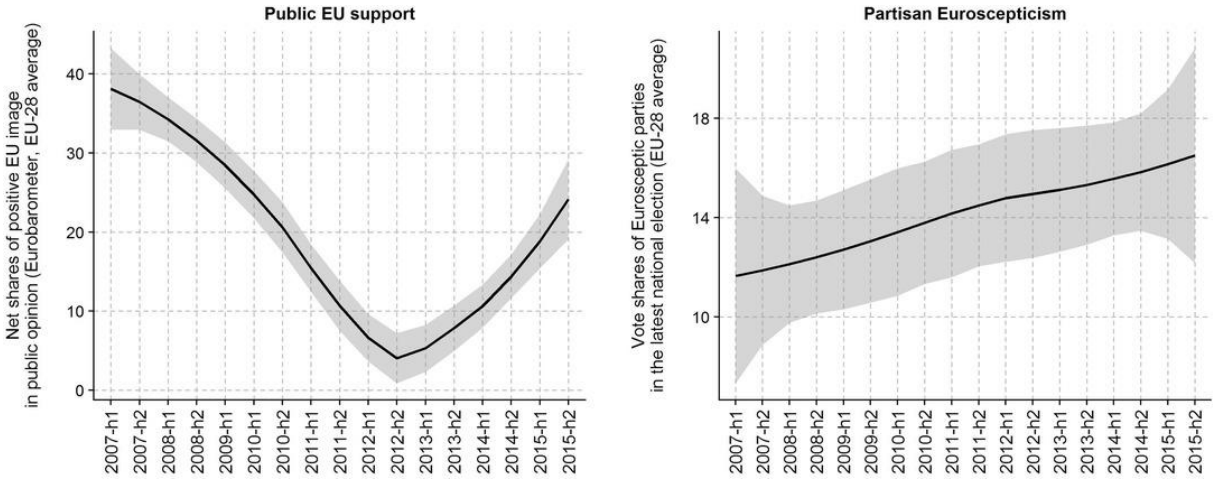


*Figure 1.* Smoothed biannual time trends for public and partisan Euroscepticism.

40 percentage points on average. Yet, this margin declines to a meagre five percentage point surplus in the second half of 2012, after which it recovers only slowly. This is partially mirrored in the electoral strength of parties that actively mobilise against European integration (right panel of Figure 1). Averaged across the EU-28, the electoral shares of parties that take a negative and salient stance on European integration has increased from approximately 12 per cent in 2007 to about 17 percent in late 2015.[3]

Notwithstanding considerable variation across and within EU member states, aggregate public and partisan Euroscepticism indicate that the Euro Crisis indeed challenged the legitimacy of European integration. While neither public nor partisan Euroscepticism have reached majority status, we expect discernible communicative responses of the key political executives involved in European integration.

*Dependent variables: Elite communication on European integration*

To study these responses, we initially draw on all 12,267 speeches delivered by a head of state or government or a European Commissioner.[4] The speeches were originally sourced from active or archived public websites and are partially auto-translated to English (De Vries et al. 2018; Schumacher et al. 2016). We resort to the raw speech texts as delivered, cleaning out only formatting markers and boilerplate.

All of these speeches have some European context, but we can hardly assume that they focus on European integration throughout. To arrive at more targeted measures, we thus looked for textual anchors indicating references to the process or products of European integration. We used regular expressions to obtain all mentions of ‘European integration’, ‘European unification’, ‘European Union’, ‘EU’ and ‘unification|uniting|integration of Europe’, including both lower-cased and upper-cased versions of these anchors. A total of 8,917 speeches contained at least one of these markers. We then extracted a three-sentence window around these markers, collapsing multiple mentions to one large text bit per speech.[5] These text windows capture all instances in which a national leader or EU Commissioner has explicitly referred to the process or product of European integration.

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In line with the theoretical arguments above, our first dependent variable has to capture the positivity or negativity that the executives attach to their communication about European integration. We capture this by a term-based sentiment analysis using the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary. This tool has been extensively validated against human coders, provides a total of 4,450 word stems with term-level sentiment weights and contains various pre-processing tools that, among other things, cover negation (Young & Soroka 2012). The resulting sentiment score stores the number of positively connoted words minus the number of negatively connoted words divided by the total number of words in each text window. This normalised indicator evaluates whether a speaker adapts more positive, more negative or largely neutral language when referring to European integration.[6]

Our second dependent variable taps into the defusion strategy. We claim that actors engaging in rhetorical defusion strategically employ language that makes inferring a clear stance from messages on European integration more difficult for the wider constituency (cf. Bischof & Senninger 2017; Online Appendix A provides a detailed justification). Thus, language complexity is a key indicator and we programmed a script that calculates the Flesch Reading Ease score for each of our integration text windows (Flesch 1948). Based on the number of terms per sentence and the number of syllables per term, this normalised score ranges from 0 to 100 where the former value indicates texts addressing university graduates and the latter indicates texts that should be easily understood by fifth graders. We invert this formula so as to indicate the complexity of language.

Clearly, these linguistic measures do not capture all possible ways European executives could frame European integration, but they are replicable and interpretable indicators of the communicative strategies we are interested in. As an illustration, Table 1 provides three examples that take comparatively extreme values on the ranges of sentiment and complexity scores we observe in our samples. The text snippet from the then Dutch national leader Jan Peter Balkenende illustrates the defence strategy by exhibiting a comparatively positive sentiment and below-average levels of complexity. The example by the then Commission president José Manuel Barroso from Portugal illustrates defusion: he avoids strong sentiment while using comparatively complex language. Finally, the statement by Mariano Rajoy blaming the EU for the Spanish economic malaise indicates a communicative undermining of European integration by using very clear, but negatively connoted language.

*Independent variables and controls*

To measure Euroscepticism in domestic public opinion, we use an item in the biannual Standard Eurobarometer which asks respondents the following: 'In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?' For each country, we add the shares of respondents with 'very positive' and 'fairly positive' images of the EU, as well as those with 'fairly negative' and 'very negative' images. We then subtract the latter from the former to get at a net EU image score.[7]

Party-based Euroscepticism is based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 1999–2014 trend dataset (Bakker et al. 2015). We use three items to identify Eurosceptic parties: their presence in parliament, the mean salience they attach to EU issues and the mean

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*Table 1.* Exemplary integration references with comparatively extreme sentiment and complexity scores

| Date | Speaker | EU reference | Sentiment score | Complexity score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28 February 2007 | J.P. Balkenende (NL) | 'If it goes well with Europe, this makes the Netherlands stronger. The *European Union* gives us unique opportunities to work with other countries to make our continent more stable, more secure, more prosperous and more sustainable. The Union is working towards strengthening its democracy and its effectiveness.' | 0.20 | 58.79 |
| 11 May 2010 | J.M. Barroso (COM/PT) | 'We intend to come forward with a proposal in July and it will certainly reflect many of the parts put now in this report by Mario Monti. You know that I've created a group of Commissioners led by Michel Barnier to discuss in more in detail the Single Market, and I am sure that the contribution of Mario Monti will be a decisive one for this agenda – for the deepening of the Single Market as the European market for the 21st century and an essential part of the economic agenda of the *European Union*. One lesson that we have to draw from this crisis is that we need to put together all those elements – the Stability and Growth Pact, the Monetary Union, of course, but also the stronger economic governance and increased economic policy coordination, and of course, all issues related to the Single Market.' | 0.05 | 73.52 |

(*Continued*)

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*Table 1.* Continued

| Date | Speaker | EU reference | Sentiment score | Complexity score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 March 2012 | M. Rajoy (ES) | 'This is a very difficult time, very complicated: Spain last year had a public deficit of 8.5 per 100; we spent ninety billion euros, nearly fifteen billion pesetas, more than earned; unemployment is in unacceptable figures and more than half of our young people cannot work; we have problems to finance ourselves in the markets; the *EU* is behind.' | −0.08 | 52.16 |

Source: Schumacher et al. (2016).

position on the EU. The EU salience item runs from 1 (not important) to 10 (most important). With the exception of the *Vlaams Belang* (which has a saliency score of 3.37), we include all parties with a score higher than 3.5. The EU position is a scale from 1 (strongly opposed) to 7 (strongly in favour). With the exception of the Polish Law and Justice Party (which has a position score of 3.7), all parties with a lower score than 3.5 were included. While they have not been in the British Parliament, we also include the UK Independence Party (UKIP) as it is an important voice for Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom. We take the electoral shares of these parties in the most recent domestic election as our indicator for partisan Euroscepticism.[8]

In terms of controls, it is plausible that national leaders and European Commissioners are partially bound by their party's positions – not the least since the party's choices affect their re-election or re-appointment. To control for this, we rely on the most recent version of the Comparative Manifesto dataset (Volkens et al. 2017) and capture a party's net EU support by subtracting the number of negative quasi-sentences on the EU from the number of positive quasi-sentences on the EU in the latest manifesto.

However, domestic EU politicisation is not the only factor that impinges on whether and how political actors justify European integration. In our models, we primarily control for the idea that 'money makes the EU go round' (Bailer et al. 2015) – a dynamic that should be particularly pronounced during the Euro Crisis. First, a speaker's communicative stance on European integration may be affected by how strongly her country of origin depends economically on the EU. We account for the percentage of a country's total exports that flows to other EU member states. Second, a speaker's EU communication may be influenced by whether his country is a net contributor or net recipient in the EU budget. We calculated net contributions in euros along annual budgetary data from the European Commission. Third, during the Euro Crisis, elites' communicative stances on European integration may

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have been driven by the risk of economic disintegration. To capture this idea, we include the monthly spread of interest rates that Eurozone countries had to pay on their ten-year bonds. Diverging risk perceptions of national credit default directly capture markets' perception on economic cohesion and solidarity in the Eurozone. During the onset of the crisis, this indicator rose dramatically and this trend was only reverted by Mario Draghi's infamous 'whatever it takes' statement on 26 July 2012 (Draghi 2012).

Taken together, these data (descriptive statistics can be found in Online Appendix B) allow us to model how European political elites publicly communicated European integration in the face of political and economic turmoil. However, one technical caveat should be noted: our language-based measures are highly sensitive and may vary from speech to speech while our independent variables change only slowly and vary by country or by half-year and election period, respectively. This is likely to lead to low model fit and clustered regression residuals. Thus, we apply the seminal Huber-White correction on our standard errors before interpreting the statistical significance of our results. Furthermore, we check the robustness of our main results using a more fine-grained measure of party-based Euroscepticism (where available, see Online Appendix C).

**Results**

To start with, let us first have a look at the aggregate trends in our dependent variables. Figure 2 plots the smoothed mean levels and 95 per cent confidence intervals of the sentiment scores and complexity values that both types of European executives have rhetorically attached to their mentions of European integration throughout the investigation period. Regarding the sentiment attached to European integration references (left panel of Figure 2), European Commissioners on average employ more positive language than national leaders. This is in line with the basic incentive structures we theorise above. We also see national leaders' language turns more negative in parallel to increasing public Euroscepticism during the Euro Crisis (cf. Figure 1). Commissioners, in contrast, communicate European integration on average more positively during the period of rising public Euroscepticism and dampen their language slightly when the aggregate public opinion recovers after 2012. These patterns partially corroborate *H1a* and *H1b* on the aggregate level. Yet, the communication of European integration by national leaders declines further after the recovery of public opinion. *H4a* leads us to suspect that there is an amplifying effect of Eurosceptic parties strengthened throughout the Euro Crisis at work.

With regard to the complexity of European integration messages (right panel in Figure 2), we find that over the course of the Euro Crisis (i.e., paralleling the rise of public Euroscepticism as well as the risk of economic disintegration) the messages of national leaders have become much clearer. Along our arguments it stands to reason that less complex language has something to do with public Euroscepticism moving into electorally relevant margins in various countries. The average complexity of EU Commissioners' messages, in contrast, hardly responds to the onset of the Euro Crisis. Only after 2012, when public opinion recovered, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) was institutionalised and Draghi made his famous 'whatever it takes' speech (Draghi 2012), did Commissioners start to send clearer messages. So, it can be either the rise of Eurosceptic parties or

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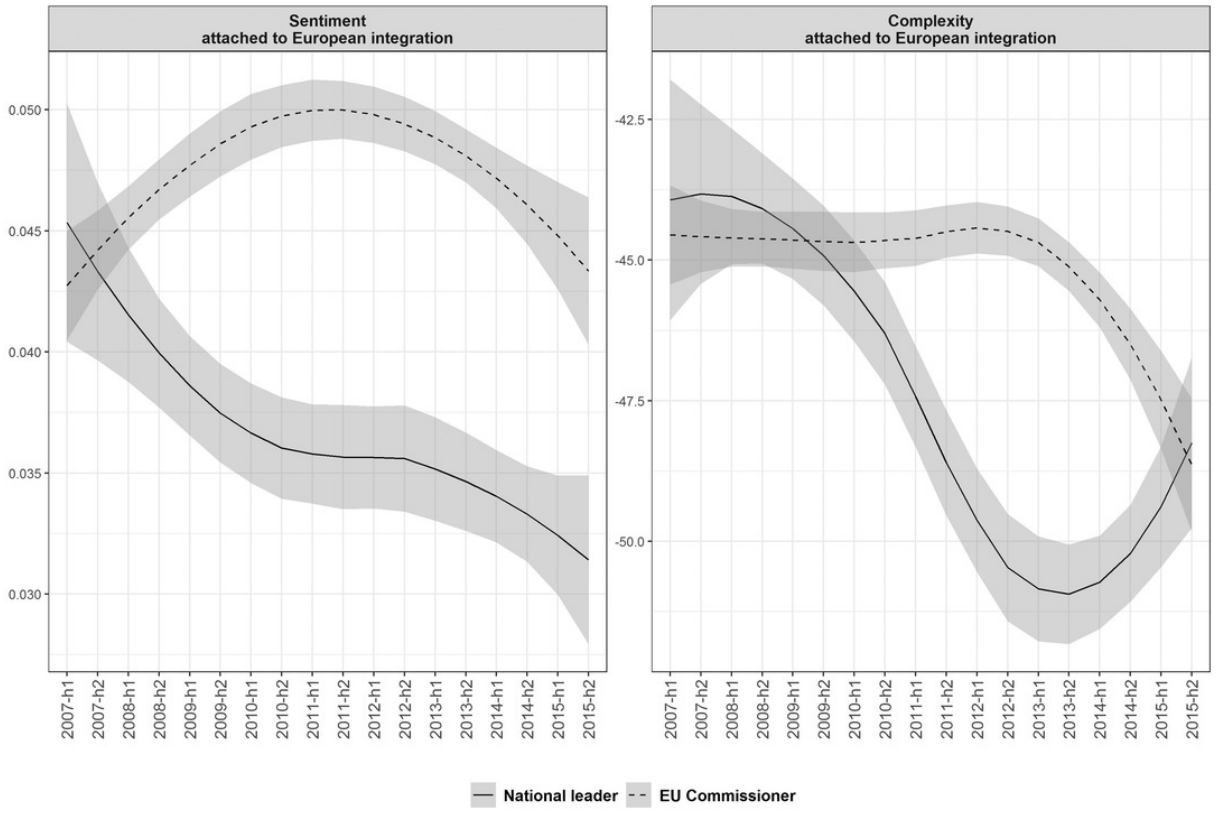


*Figure 2.* Smoothed biannual time trends (LOESS, span = 0.8) in the expressed communicative stances on European integration.

the declining integration threats from financial markets that induce or allow European Commissioners to defuse European integration less.

So how do our expectations pan out when the variance across the executives' countries of origin is taken into account? For each of the two types of actors and each of the two dependent variables, we build our estimation models consecutively. The initial model considers only linear politicisation effects in line with *H1a*, *H1b*, *H2a* and *H2b*. The subsequent model adds the exponential effects as theorised in *H3a–H3d*. The final model also contains an interaction term tracing the multiplicative effect of public and partisan Euroscepticism as hypothesised in *H4a–H4d*.

Table 2 presents these models for national leaders. Models 1–3 analyse effects of domestic Euroscepticism on the sentiment these actors attach to European integration in public speeches. Model 1 initially corroborates the basic expectation that national leaders' communication becomes more negative under higher levels of Euroscepticism in public opinion (*H1a*). Adding an exponentiated version of this variable in model 2 leaves this linear effect intact but its coefficient underscores that national leaders' undermining European integration becomes considerably more pronounced at particularly high levels of public Euroscepticism (*H3a*).

Models 1 and 2 also show that national leaders' public stances on integration become slightly more negative when Eurosceptic challenger parties gain a higher share of the national vote. Against conventional criteria for statistical significance, however, this marginal effect is not robust. But once we interact this variable with the level of public

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*Table 2.* Regression models for national leaders

| | Sentiment of integration references | | | Complexity of integration references | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Public Euroscepticism | −0.063** (0.022) | −0.060** (0.022) | −0.029 (0.024) | −0.164*** (0.024) | −0.164*** (0.024) | −0.069** (0.026) |
| Eurosceptic party strength | −0.038 (0.026) | −0.038 (0.029) | −0.061* (0.030) | 0.004 (0.028) | −0.019 (0.032) | −0.088** (0.033) |
| Public Euroscepticism (exp) | | −0.163* (0.073) | −0.244** (0.078) | | 0.128 (0.079) | −0.115 (0.085) |
| Eurosceptic party strength (exp) | | −0.0003 (0.019) | −0.018 (0.019) | | 0.033 (0.021) | −0.019 (0.022) |
| Public × Partisan Euroscepticism | | | 0.068** (0.023) | | | 0.205*** (0.025) |
| Party EU position | −0.124*** (0.028) | −0.133*** (0.030) | −0.107*** (0.029) | 0.007 (0.032) | −0.004 (0.035) | 0.074* (0.036) |
| EU trade dependence | 0.150*** (0.023) | 0.150*** (0.023) | 0.168*** (0.022) | 0.070* (0.028) | 0.077** (0.028) | 0.132*** (0.028) |
| Net contribution | 0.058* (0.024) | 0.056* (0.024) | 0.075** (0.025) | −0.262*** (0.027) | −0.260*** (0.027) | −0.201*** (0.027) |
| Eurozone bond spread | 0.033 (0.019) | 0.038* (0.019) | 0.044* (0.019) | 0.009 (0.022) | 0.005 (0.022) | 0.022 (0.022) |
| Constant | −0.005 (0.017) | −0.017 (0.018) | −0.054* (0.022) | −0.012 (0.018) | −0.005 (0.019) | −0.117*** (0.023) |
| Observations | 2.809 | 2.809 | 2.809 | 2.809 | 2.809 | 2.809 |
| $R^2$ | 0.029 | 0.030 | 0.032 | 0.143 | 0.144 | 0.162 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.027 | 0.027 | 0.029 | 0.141 | 0.142 | 0.159 |
| Residual standard error | 0.974 (df = 2802) | 0.973 (df = 2800) | 0.972 (df = 2799) | 0.910 (df = 2802) | 0.910 (df = 2800) | 0.900 (df = 2799) |
| F statistic | 13.913*** (df = 6; 2802) | 10.901*** (df = 8; 2800) | 10.337*** (df = 9; 2799) | 77.638*** (df = 6; 2802) | 58.941*** (df = 8; 2800) | 60.084*** (df = 9; 2799) |

Notes: Standardised coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

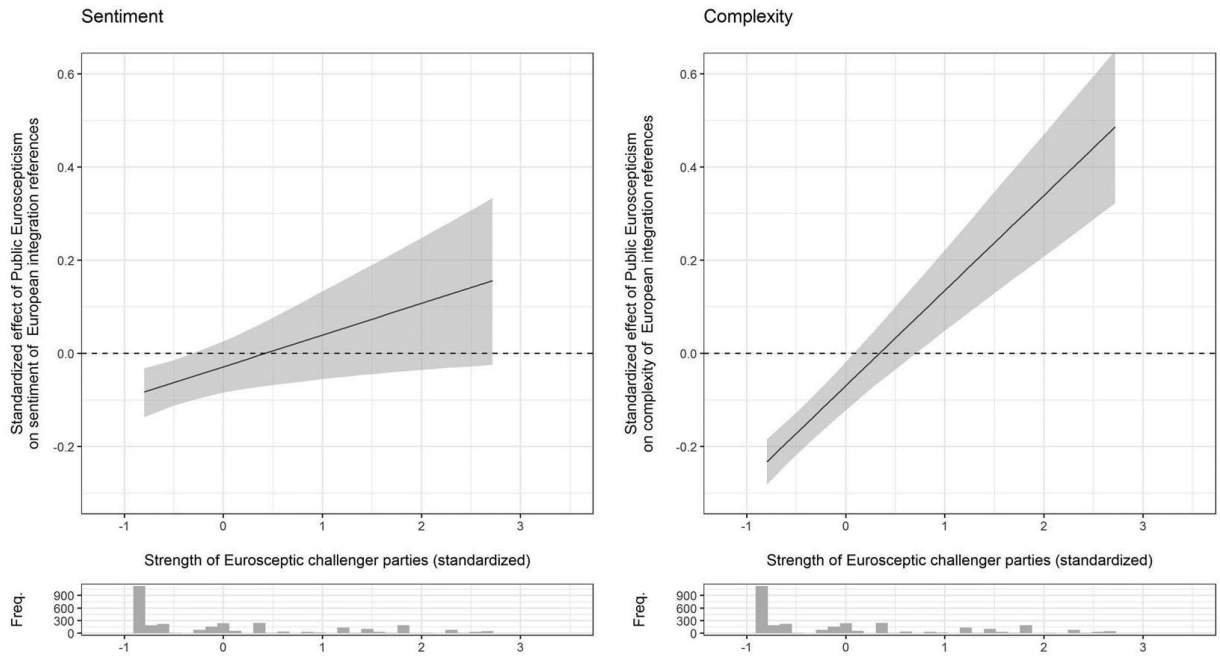


*Figure 3.* Interaction effects of public and partisan Euroscepticism on national leaders' communication on European integration.

Euroscepticism in model 3, we find clear statistical evidence for a moderating effect of partisan Euroscepticism. Yet, surprisingly, the visual analysis of this interaction effect shows that it works in the opposite direction of *H4a*. We theorised that stronger Eurosceptic parties induce national leaders to send more negative public messages on European integration, but the left panel of Figure 3 shows that their response to Euroscepticism turns slightly more positive when Eurosceptic challenger parties become stronger in domestic partisan competition. Admittedly, the histogram and the large confidence interval indicate that we have too few observations of very strong Eurosceptic parties to achieve conventional levels of statistical significance, but the slope of the interaction effect suggests that when high levels of public Euroscepticism are strongly mobilised by Eurosceptic parties, national leaders refrain from sending negative signals on European integration in their speeches.

A possible explanation is that national leaders try to cater to Eurosceptic potential in their domestic electorate by sending negative integration messages only when no or only a weak Eurosceptic challenger party is present. But once this Eurosceptic voter potential is captured or even absorbed by a domestic challenger party – meaning that the Eurosceptic potential in public opinion roughly equals the vote share of Eurosceptic parties – they have little to gain from this strategy and rather pander to their own pro-European voters instead. This explanation builds on the assumption that people who vote for Eurosceptic parties do so on the basis of the Eurosceptic platform. To the extent that this holds in other analyses (see also Adam et al. 2017), the strategy of Emmanuel Macron is probably not that exceptional after all.

Before we move further, a few words on the control variables. Surprisingly, the EU support by a national leader's party is negatively related to her public presentation of European integration. This might indicate attempts to capture more sceptical voters

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beyond the already supportive party constituency. As assumed, leaders from countries that depend more strongly on intra-European trade also present European integration more positively. Somewhat more surprisingly, we find that leaders of net-contributing states tend to communicate more positively on European integration, possibly because they have to justify the shares of the national budget moving to Brussels. Finally, we see that the economic risk of disintegration during the Euro Crisis has induced national leaders to defend European integration in public which is consistent with the assumption that they are functionally interested in maintaining European integration.

Let us then turn to models 3–6 in Table 2, which provide our estimates for the complexity that national leaders attach to European integration in their public speeches. Contrary to *H2a*, the first two models suggest that higher levels of public Euroscepticism induce national leaders to send clearer messages to their electorate. Refuting *H3b*, we find no exponential effects in model 5. Also, we find no evidence that extreme levels of public and partisan Euroscepticism are associated with more complex messages. But (the absence of) these direct effects are only part of the story. What matters is, again, the interaction between public and partisan Euroscepticism. This is captured in model 6 in Table 2 as well as in the right panel of Figure 3. Only when Eurosceptic parties are weak, do national leaders prefer to send clearer messages on European integration to their electorate. The stronger Eurosceptic parties become, however, the more national leaders respond to public Euroscepticism with more complex language. This interaction is strong and also significant almost throughout the whole range of Eurosceptic party strength that we observe in our sample. To put it bluntly: in line with *H4d*, national leaders send less clear messages on European integration especially when a high level of public Euroscepticism is successfully mobilised by Eurosceptic parties. This is consistent with recent literature on strategic party competition which also finds position blurring strategies mainly among moderate pro-European mainstream parties (Adam et al. 2017; Rovny 2012).

In this vein, the control variables suggest that national leaders coming from more pro-European parties also send more complex messages. Pointing to a functional motivation of the defusion theory we also find that national leaders from countries with higher trade dependence tend to send more complex messages on European integration. To the contrary, leading a net-contributor country induces national executives to send less complex messages on European integration. Finally, we find no evidence that the risk of economic disintegration during the Euro Crisis has exerted an independent effect on the complexity of national executives' communication on Europe.

Let us turn next to our analysis of the communication of European Commissioners in Table 3. Models 1–3 again present the estimates for the sentiment these actors attach to European integration in their public speeches. As suggested by *H1b*, defending European integration is the fallback strategy for Commissioners facing higher levels of Euroscepticism in their country of origin. The more sceptical the domestic electorate, the more positive the sentiment they employ. In line with *H3c*, this initial reflex is disproportionately stronger at particularly high levels of public Euroscepticism as the inclusion of the exponential effect in model 2 underlines.

With regard to the domestic strength of Eurosceptic parties, the strategic considerations of European Commissioners appear to be more complicated than we have theorised above. The average effect in model 1 implies that they respond by slightly undermining European

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*Table 3.* Regression models for European Commissioners

| | Sentiment of integration references | | | Complexity of integration references | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Public Euroscepticism | 0.111*** (0.015) | 0.076*** (0.016) | 0.083*** (0.017) | −0.028 (0.016) | −0.026 (0.017) | −0.012 (0.018) |
| Eurosceptic party strength | −0.035* (0.014) | 0.059** (0.019) | 0.041 (0.022) | 0.081*** (0.015) | 0.055* (0.021) | 0.019 (0.025) |
| Public Euroscepticism (exp) | | 0.028* (0.012) | 0.032* (0.012) | | 0.037** (0.012) | 0.045*** (0.012) |
| Eurosceptic party strength (exp) | | −0.122*** (0.017) | −0.117*** (0.018) | | 0.040* (0.018) | 0.049** (0.019) |
| Public × Partisan Euroscepticism | | | 0.034 (0.018) | | | 0.066*** (0.019) |
| Party EU position | −0.020 (0.017) | 0.002 (0.017) | −0.0001 (0.017) | 0.208*** (0.017) | 0.201*** (0.017) | 0.198*** (0.017) |
| EU trade dependence | 0.076*** (0.016) | 0.075*** (0.016) | 0.083*** (0.016) | −0.050*** (0.015) | −0.049*** (0.015) | −0.033* (0.015) |
| Net contribution | −0.048** (0.017) | −0.060*** (0.017) | −0.061*** (0.017) | 0.011 (0.016) | 0.015 (0.017) | 0.014 (0.017) |
| Eurozone bond spread | 0.002 (0.014) | 0.015 (0.014) | 0.014 (0.014) | −0.032* (0.015) | −0.033* (0.015) | −0.034* (0.015) |
| Constant | 0.006 (0.014) | 0.011 (0.014) | 0.0002 (0.015) | 0.027 (0.014) | 0.026 (0.014) | 0.004 (0.016) |
| Observations | 5.084 | 5.084 | 5.084 | 5.084 | 5.084 | 5.084 |
| $R^2$ | 0.018 | 0.027 | 0.027 | 0.045 | 0.048 | 0.050 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.017 | 0.025 | 0.025 | 0.044 | 0.046 | 0.048 |
| Residual standard error | 0.998 (df = 5077) | 0.994 (df = 5075) | 0.993 (df = 5074) | 0.963 (df = 5077) | 0.961 (df = 5075) | 0.960 (df = 5074) |
| F statistic | 15.245*** (df = 6; 5077) | 17.294*** (df = 8; 5075) | 15.745*** (df = 9; 5074) | 39.749*** (df = 6; 5077) | 31.725*** (df = 8; 5075) | 29.770*** (df = 9; 5074) |

Notes: Standardised coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

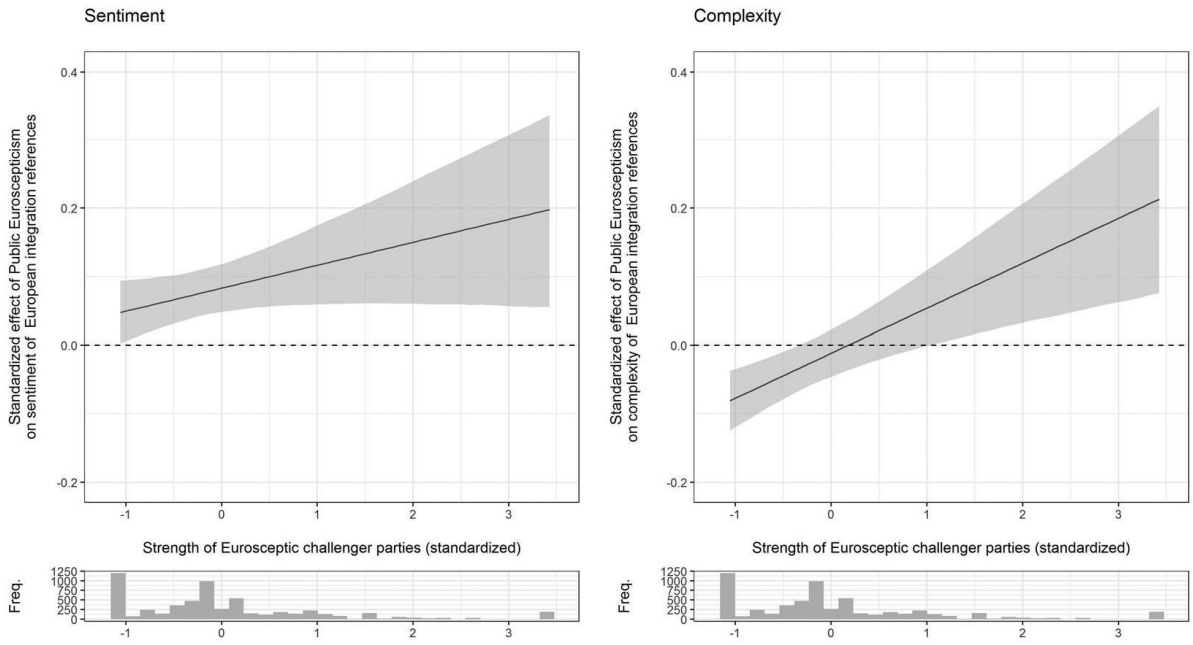


*Figure 4.* Interaction effects of public and partisan Euroscepticism on Commissioners' communication on European integration.

integration when Eurosceptic challenger parties grow stronger at home. But the inclusion of the exponential effect in model 2 suggests that this strategy is only dominant where Eurosceptic parties become particularly strong while the initial response of defending integration remains intact at lower ranges of challenger party strength. Possible explanations for this observation might have to do with the fact that a particularly strong challenger party might be close to being part of the next government that then decides about a Commissioner's re-appointment.

This also suggests that the varying effect of Eurosceptic party strength on expressed integration sentiment by Commissioners might be subject to an interaction with the level of Euroscepticism in public opinion. However, this effect closely fails to reach statistical significance in model 3. Graphically analysing it (Figure 4, left panel) shows that Commissioners' responses to public Euroscepticism are significantly positive throughout the observed range of challenger party strength. As suspected in *H4c*, the slope of the interaction is also positive, meaning that Commissioners tend to communicate European integration even more positively when high levels of public and partisan Euroscepticism co-occur. But it is not steep enough and we lack sufficient observations of countries with very strong Eurosceptic parties to arrive at a robust statistical conclusion here. In sum, these patterns suggest that more refined theorising is needed when it comes to Commissioners' responses to domestic challenger parties at home.

Turning to the control variables, we note that a Commissioner's domestic party position on European integration has no discernible effect on expressed integration sentiment – compared to national leaders they appear to be less dependent on the intricacies of domestic partisan competition. But like national leaders, also those Commissioners coming from countries that hinge strongly on intra-European trade are more positive on

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European integration. Contrary to national leaders, however, Commissioners coming from net-contributor countries tend to portray European integration more negatively in their public appearances. This is probably part of a Brussels' bargaining tactic aiming to ensure that the home country's money is spent along national interests and priorities. Finally, the economic risk of disintegration appears to have had no consistent effect on the sentiment that Commissioners have publicly attached to European integration.

So, in essence we find that Commissioners defend integration in response to Euroscepticism at home. But do they also express this clearly? Models 4–6 present our complexity estimates for Commissioners' messages on European integration. Contrary to our expectation in *H2b*, public Euroscepticism has no clear negative effect on the complexity that Commissioners communicate. The sign is negative as hypothesised, but not statistically significant. Including an exponential effect in model 5 rather suggests that Commissioners send slightly more complex integration messages if public and partisan Euroscepticism are particularly high.

Yet, including the interaction effect in model 6 stresses that also here different configurations of domestic EU politicisation matter. The highly significant interaction effect is graphically presented in the right panel of Figure 4. It shows that our original *H4c* on clearer integration messages by Commissioners under higher levels of public Euroscepticism indeed holds, but only if Eurosceptic parties are weak. The stronger these parties grow, the less clear are the messages that European Commissioners send on European integration.

Beyond these politicisation effects, we find that Commissioners coming from more pro-European parties tend to send more complex messages. Trade dependence of a Commissioner's country of origin is associated with clearer messages on European integration while the net contribution to the EU budget has no effect. Interestingly, we find that the higher risk of economic disintegration has led to clearer messages by Commissioners, probably reflecting attempts to call member states and the Council to order.

## Conclusions

Given the increasing public awareness and contestation of the EU, the chances for sustained political cooperation across national borders will not in the least depend on how the involved executives cue their domestic audiences on European integration. Which strategies these executives pursue in the face of domestic Euroscepticism, however, is a matter of ongoing debate. Extant scenarios present static predictions; by limiting their attention to specific actor motives and specific set ups of EU politicisation, they imply that either undermining, defusing or defending European integration are the dominant communicative responses by European executives. This article aims to push the debate further by specifying the incentives of different actor types under varying configurations of public and partisan Euroscepticism at home. Our analysis of the sentiment and the complexity that national leaders and Commissioners have attached to European integration in their public speeches during the Euro Crisis – a key period for EU politicisation – provide highly relevant insights in this regard.

We find that national leaders indeed tend to undermine European integration in response to growing public Euroscepticism at home by sending clearer and more negative

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messages in their public communication. European Commissioners, in contrast, defend European integration by sending more positive integration messages when their domestic citizenry turns more sceptical. Importantly, these responses are not only linearly related to declining EU support in public opinion. For both types of actors, the communicated sentiment increases exponentially with the share of Eurosceptics among the domestic public.

These findings add considerable nuance to extant arguments on a constraining dissensus and on re-legitimation efforts. Initial deviations from the permissive consensus in public opinion do not necessarily result in very strong executive responses. But these responses do become increasingly stronger the closer Euroscepticism is to becoming a majority position in the electorate. For national leaders, this may turn into a vicious circle: If a negative public opinion induces them to send even more negative cues on European integration, public Euroscepticism may grow even faster. While European Commissioners might not leave an equally strong imprint on domestic discourse, we show that they defend European integration much more strongly in such a situation. Taken together, these findings imply that increasing public Euroscepticism can lead to stronger polarisation of intergovernmental and supranational executives in domestic debates, fueling polarisation on part of the electorate even further. To study these dynamics in detail, David Cameron's behaviour around the decision to call the Brexit referendum might provide a useful case study.

Yet, our findings also suggest that we need to pay more careful attention to the specific configuration of domestic EU politicisation, especially with regard to different combinations of public Euroscepticism and its partisan mobilisation. We find that the national leaders' initially negative response to a sceptical public opinion is moderated by the strength of Eurosceptic parties, but in ways contradicting the constraining dissensus argument. The more such parties have successfully mobilised the Eurosceptic potential in public opinion, the more national leaders resort to positively communicating European integration in public. Likewise, we find evidence that Commissioners also turn somewhat more positive when high levels of public Euroscepticism and strong challenger parties combine. Statistically, our findings in this regard are not fully robust and require additional research – for example, by testing our hypotheses with other data on public EU communication (cf. Adam et al. 2017; Hutter et al. 2016; Rauh & De Wilde 2018). But the tendencies we find suggest that national leaders see little electoral gains from undermining European integration in countries where Eurosceptic parties have already absorbed the Eurosceptic potential among the citizenry. This situation renders pro-European cues by coalitions of national leaders and European Commissioners more likely again. For this dynamic, Emmanuel Macron's 'En Marche' campaign should be a suitable case study.

Our findings also demonstrate, however, that such public defences of European integration are often hidden in language that is harder to understand for the wider citizenry. Initially we find that growing public Euroscepticism induces both national leaders and Commissioners to use clearer language in their European integration messages to the public. Yet once Eurosceptic parties become stronger in electoral terms, both national leaders and European Commissioners start using more complex language when they publicly refer to European integration. This supports the technocratic resilience perspective and contrasts the re-legitimation arguments. It remains questionable, however, whether this strategy is

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viable against the more simple messages that populist parties tend to send (on partisan position blurring, see Rovny 2012). Along with our findings it might work where Eurosceptic challenger parties have already exhausted the mobilisation potential that the particular level of public Euroscepticism in a country unfolds.

Of course, our findings on the unexpected effects of Eurosceptic party strength and rhetorical defusion as well as our focus on the Euro Crisis period warrant further empirical research, but our work already highlights that integrating the extant and rather static scenarios promises a more detailed understanding of politicisation consequences. To see whether politicisation is a boon or bane for further political integration in Europe, we should take the responses of different types of actors to different configurations of Euroscepticism in public opinion and in partisan competition into account. Beyond merely communicative responses, furthermore, corresponding expectations could be used to extend extant models on the actual policy responsiveness of European executives in Brussels (see, e.g., Rauh 2018; Toshkov 2011; Wratil 2017).

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**Online Appendix**

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

**Table A1: Assessing convergent validity of the complexity measure**
**Table A1: Descriptive statistics for the variables in the models for national leaders**
**TableA2: Descriptive statistics for the variables in themodels for European Commissioners**
**Figure C1: Quarterly aggregated polling data of party-based Euroscepticism**
**Table C1: Robustness check for national leaders using opinion poll data.**

**Figure C2: Robustness check for national leaders' responses to different politicization configurations using opinion polling data**

## Notes

1. That is not to say that elites may not disagree on the exact contents of supranational policies, but they are expected to favour the idea of supranational coordination.

2. *EUSpeech* (Schumacher et al. 2016) is a dataset of 18,403 speeches from EU leaders (i.e., Heads of Government in 10 EU member states, EU Commissioners, party leaders in the European Parliament, and European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund leaders) from 2007 to 2015. It is available at Harvard's Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XPCVEI (last accessed: September 26, 2017).

3. The figure covers the most recent electoral shares of parties that score lower than 3.5 on the seven-point EU position scale and equal or higher than 4 on the ten-point EU salience scale in the CHES, collected by Bakker et al. (2015).

4. With regard to national leaders, *EUSpeech* covers the following member states: Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. These cases reflect both institutional and geographical variation in Europe, containing Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries; countries from the north and from the south; and countries that have been hit hard by the financial crisis and countries that hardly suffered at all. What is more, they display considerable variation in public Euroscepticism. With regard to EU Commissioners, all 28 member states are covered.

5. We decided on a three-sentence window having experimented also with one-sentence windows and 60- term windows, because (a) they are a natural context unit for human listeners, and (b) the resulting data windows were empirically most well-behaved in distributional terms. Data on the smaller and larger windows are available in the replication package, which is available online at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NDJY0J.

6. We have replicated our findings using the sentiment measures discussed in Lowe et al. (2011) and Proksch et al. (2019) who suggest – instead of using positive sentiment words minus negative sentiment words divided by the total number of words like we do – using the logged ratio of positive and negative sentiment words. In our corpus both measures correlate very strongly (r = 0.87), which strengthens our confidence that both capture the same construct. When we replicate our statistical models for sentiment using this logged sentiment ratio as the dependent variable, our substantive conclusions remain mostly unchanged; the only differences are that for national leaders the marginal effect of partisan Euroscepticism in models 1 and 2 become significant in the hypothesised direction, and for Commissioners partisan Euroscepticism becomes significant in model 2 but opposite the hypothesised direction.

7. Ideally, we would resort to respondents' assessment of their country's EU membership as the standard item for cumulative EU support or opposition (Lubbers & Scheepers 2005). However, the European Commission decided to discontinue this item after 2011 (it was part of the *Parlemeter* in more recent periods again). During the periods of overlap, the EU image item we use is strongly and positively correlated with this more traditional measure within and across countries (see the replication package).

8. Since France votes in two rounds in its parliamentary elections, it is hard to establish the exact vote percentage for each party. Therefore, we included the resulting percentage of total seats of each challenger party in the *Assemblée nationale* instead.

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